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AUTHOR Milz, Vera E.
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ABSTRACT

The concern for literacy dominates the elementary classroom as instructional theories mesh with the realities of practice. Reviews of research literature, such as "Becoming a Nation of Readers," have given considerable support to meaning-centered, active language learning curricula. Questioning whether today's children will be literate enough to meet future demands, many current publications have discussed how this approach is superior to focusing on isolated skills and drills instruction. Teachers must observe students' learning processes carefully to select the combination of instructional methods and materials that will truly benefit them. By inviting parents, school boards, administrators, and the general public into the classroom on a regular basis, teachers can demonstrate how their approach to reading and writing instruction works. But teachers must go beyond testing by keeping records and folders of children's work to describe how they are learning. Inservice support programs can provide teachers with useful information and guidance. The increasing amount of case study and ethnographic research has allowed university and school personnel to gain a deeper understanding and greater articulation of literacy development by examining how children learn reading and writing skills in the classroom. (JD)

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
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Literacy: Learning and Schooling

by Vera E. Milz

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Literacy: Learning and Schooling*

By Vera E. Milz
Way Elementary School
Bloomfield Hills, MI

In January 1987 I will begin my twenty-fifth year of teaching. Though at times it seems like yesterday that I first walked into a classroom, certainly enough time has passed that I can bring a perspective to the topic of exploring the tensions between theories of pedagogy, theories of subject matter and the realities of practice. As an elementary teacher, the development of literacy permeates every happening in my classroom. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to explore the subject of how children learn to read and write as it pertains to the above topic.

Last year as a classroom teacher, I had 23 first graders who eagerly read and wrote. In fact, during the summer months over half of them have continued to write notes to me. They tell me of books they are enjoying as well as the current activities that they are involved in. Each of them has learned how to communicate using written language to meet their personal needs. They are at many different levels of proficiency, yet they continue to grow in their control of how language works.

Looking back over the years, what has happened this past year is not an uncommon occurrence in my classroom. Yet the methods by which these children have learned to read and write are not common in classrooms across the United States. The report, "Becoming A Nation of Readers," states that basal reading programs account for 75 to 90 percent of what goes on during reading periods in elementary classrooms, and few children are allowed to write more than a sentence or two (Commission on Reading, 1984). Within my classroom is a library of over 2000 books which provide the base on which my individualized reading program is built. My class is introduced to reading by hearing books read to them. After a few days of first grade, children in my class have bombarded the public library asking for books by a particular author--usually the author of books that I have read to them. Eventually they develop tastes for certain authors similar to the way that adult readers do. As I encourage them to join with me in the reading of a particular book, I find they pick up the book later to read it on their own. As they make these first attempts, they discover they are readers. A similar discovery occurs as they begin writing on the first day of school when they are given an empty notebook which they may use as a personal journal. They write notes and stories that amuse and interest me. They use spellings which reflect logical, thoughtful decisions, although I have not taught these inventive spellings to them. Their notes, journal entries, letters, interest in stories and poems support my belief that children learn to read and write by engaging in each process itself in a meaning-centered, active language learning environment (Milz, 1981).

Research and theory have given considerable support to the meaning-

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centered, active language learning curriculum found in my classroom. Graves (1983), Smith (1978), Goodman (1986), Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) are but a few of the current advocates who have published in professional journals and books, or presented at conferences and school district inservice workshops. Over twenty years ago, similar suggestions were made by Lee and Allen (1963) and Stauffer (1970). A steady stream of reasons why such an approach is superior to isolated skills and drills instruction are articulated in current publications which question whether today's children will be literate enough to meet the demands of the future. "Becoming A Nation of Readers" states there is little evidence that most workbook and skill activities are related to reading achievement, and suggests that children engage in more independent reading and spend more time writing (Commission on Reading, 1984). Yet as Moffett (1985) states, "Go into the classroom itself--ignore what the adults are saying and look at what the kids are doing --you will find little of what you have heard about...When I recommend individualized reading and writing, teachers commonly say, 'I think you're right, but I can't do those things in my school.'" Although I do not believe it is true in my classroom, it is easy to conclude that there is little match between pedagogy, subject matter and actual practice in many of our schools. So where do we go from here...

Answers to this perplexing problem are not easy to find. Where to begin? I would like to return to my classroom and look at the children who have learned within it. Over the years, I have had to search and read and discover what was happening to enable these young students to become literate individuals. Through this, I became a teacher-researcher. My informants were my students. As I gained insights from them, I began to read and assimilate the discoveries of fellow researchers. I learned that children moved to using the conventional forms as they wrote a meaningful message. The spelling of high-frequency words, for example, does not need to be taught in isolation, as I know these words are written over and over again. My confidence in children grew daily as I observed and worked with each new class. This has allowed me to take the best portions of programs and materials and use them to the children's benefit. I can discard those practices which are not suitable, and understand if certain materials are not helping my students. All teachers need to be empowered in this way. They must become observers and decision-makers --the experts in their own classrooms.

Teachers must make professional decisions in their classrooms, but they also must find ways to show parents, school boards, administrators and the general public that these pedagogic approaches are the best way to achieve literacy. This will not be easy because of the widespread assumption that anyone who has gone to school is now qualified to decide how it is to be taught. A doctor would never allow a patient's parent to tell them how to perform an operation, and teachers must assert the same kind of professional control over the hows of literacy learning. I have found that inviting parents, administrators and even school board members to my classroom on a regular basis is the best way to demonstrate how learning to read and write is taking place.

Furthermore, teachers must go beyond testing to describe how children are learning. I use folders of their work to evaluate each child's growth in writing, and I keep

anecdotal records including transcripts of actual reading to describe their reading progress. A child who begins the year barely writing legible words and who finishes it writing fluent sentences needs to be proud of the accomplishment. In reading, the successful first grade reader is not one that recognizes beginning sounds, or scores a 2.3 grade level, but one who makes sense of a growing number of appropriate texts. This is the kind of information which must be communicated to parents if children are to be supported by all concerned parties.

Long ago I realized that as a teacher I could not close the door to my classroom and exist in isolation. I also believe that University Departments of Education cannot turn graduating teachers into the schools and forget them. Over the years, one of my greatest supports has been the information and guidance I have received from University faculty. However, I believe that a much closer working relationship must develop between schools and universities in the years to come. I have seen everything in an educational methods class destroyed as a student worked with a supervising teacher who promoted contradictory ideas. Novice teachers can face the same danger as they assume the responsibilities of their first position. Yet, I have heard of positive inservice support programs. For example, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the school district has purchased part of the University professor's contract so that she can provide inservice sessions, do classroom demonstrations and assist in writing curriculum.

Another promising development has been the growing respect for case study and ethnographic research which allows university and school personnel to examine together how children are learning to read and write. As children are observed instead of statistical scores being calculated, a deeper understanding can be reached which allows for greater articulation of literacy development.

Much remains to be done. We live in a world that is changing daily as new technology enters our lives. As we work together, we will discover how best to meet the literacy needs of the children in our care, and help them into this new and challenging time. Jennifer wrote the following words as part of a letter to me (Milz, 1981), "you help me Read you help me writ and you make me happy." She gives us a lot to consider.

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Vera E. Milz, Ed.D., is a teacher at Way Elementary School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

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